



456-01-2001

First Modern Record of Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) in Pennsylvania
by
Jerry McWilliams

On a balmy sunny Saturday afternoon I received a phone call from Dave Darney who calmly exclaimed that he had found what he believed was a Boreal Owl on Presque Isle State Park and thought I should come out and have a look. As a licensed bander Dave Darney has spent many years finding and banding Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*) on Presque Isle State Park in Erie, Pennsylvania. The birding community has always predicted that if anyone should ever find a Boreal Owl it would be Dave Darney.

It happened on April 7, 2001. Only minutes before finding the Boreal Owl, Dave had found a Northern Saw-whet Owl in the pines near B-trail. The image of the saw-whet was still fresh in his mind, so he knew immediately that he had indeed found a Boreal Owl. The Northern Saw-whet Owl was not in a place where Dave could easily capture the bird, but the Boreal Owl was on the bottom limb of a pine tree that could easily be reached from below.

My wife Linda and I arrived around 4:15 PM and Dave escorted us to the tree where we had stunning views of the Boreal Owl. After taking some documentary photographs we assisted Dave in hauling his equipment to the site for an attempt to capture and band the owl. In the process of setting up the materials for banding, Pat Kramer a novice birder, who understandably was not able to grasp the significance of this sighting, watched on with curiosity and interest. Since the owl was about eight feet above the ground Dave set a stepladder under the half-asleep bird to bring it within reach. Dave climbed the ladder holding his homemade trap. He had fastened a mist net to a square aluminum frame hinged in the middle to fold like a book. When the bird flew into the net the frame could be clapped around the bird capturing it within the mesh of the net. Dave assigned jobs to Linda and me. Mine was to grab the owl as soon as it became entangled in the net so that it could not escape or injure itself. Linda's job was to attach a glove to the end of a long stick that would reach up to the owl. The glove on stick was to resemble an approaching hand that would frighten the bird into the net that Dave was holding. It took only a couple of minutes to make the capture. After extricating the owl from the entanglement of the mist net I held the it, thrashing in my hand. Dave was now very excited as he fumbled about his equipment to locate the proper band size. Once the bird was banded and measurements and many more photographs taken, it was released at 4:45 PM. It flew to a nearby pine tree and landed about eye level where it remained until just before dark. Despite an intensive search the following morning it could not be relocated.

The Boreal Owl was a couple of inches longer than a Northern Saw-whet Owl and chunkier. The ground color of its wings and mantle was a dusky gray-brown spotted with white; its nape and back of head was brown and splotched with white. Its crown and forehead was dark brown and heavily spotted, not streaked, with white. The facial disk was white, except for the grayish smudge at the bottom of each corner of the face, and surrounded by a black border. A prominent black border passed around the facial disk and down to each yellow eye. The bill was ivory-colored with a bluish-green tint. The underside was grayish-brown with large white spots forming rows down the front to the undertail coverts.

The only other record of Boreal Owl in the state was one shot near Wilkinsburg in Allegheny County on March 12, 1896 by Dr. D. A. Atkinson (Todd 1940). The specimen resides in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Tabulation Form - Round One

Species: Boreal Owl (Aegolius funereus)

Date of Sighting: 7 April 2001 to 7 April 2001

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Dave Darney, Jerry McWilliams, Linda McWilliams

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: Jerry McWilliams

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead	X							
D. Couchman	X							
P. Hess	X							
J. Stanley	X							
B. Reid	X							
R. Lieberman P. Rodewald	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0/0

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 11/4/01